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Fragments of University Reminiscence

William C. Atkinson

Edited and annotated by Ann L Mackenzie

Chapter 2

1932–: Glasgow and a Chair

On a decade, 1932. The year in Madrid had led to a lectureship in an English university.¹ Now, with some modest publications to my name—the thesis had appeared in Paris, in the *Revue Hispanique*—,² and experience as Dean of Faculty and Honorary Secretary of the Modern Humanities Research Association (members in 28 countries),³ I made bold to apply for the Stevenson Chair of Spanish at Gilmorehill [i.e., at the University of Glasgow situated on Gilmour Hill]. Sir Daniel Stevenson, among the University's greatest benefactors, was too, as I came to appreciate, one of Glasgow's most lovable—to some most cantankerous—eccentrics. When he died and I wrote the entry for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, I noted in proof that the Editor, having heard much of him, had presumed to alter radically my judgement of his character. My version stands.⁴

1 A reference to the fact that from January 1926, he was appointed to his first academic post, as Lecturer in charge of the Department of Spanish at Armstrong College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in the University of Durham.

2 A reference to his MA research thesis, on Pérez de Oliva, published as *Hernán Pérez de Oliva. A Biographical and Critical Study*, *Revue Hispanique*, LXXI:160 (1927), 309–484.

3 The Modern Humanities Research Association had been founded by E. Allison Peers in 1918. Atkinson acted as its Honorary Secretary between 1929 and 1936; Peers was one of Atkinson's referees for the Stevenson Chair of Spanish at Glasgow University. His reference forms part of Atkinson's portfolio of papers (reproduced here) that made up his application, dated 20 February 1932.

4 William C. Atkinson was author of the original entry, c.1945]. See 'Stevenson, Sir Daniel Macaulay, baronet (1851–1944)', rev. Irene Maver, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford. U. P., 2004), <<https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/36286>> (accessed 30 January 2018). For an appreciative, yet truthful memoir on Sir Daniel Stevenson, founder of the Stevenson Chairs of Spanish and Italian at Glasgow University in 1925, and Chancellor of that University (1934–1944), see the tribute given by Sir Hector Hetherington, the then Principal, 'Sir Daniel and the University', dated 13 July 1944 (available, with other obituaries, in Glasgow University's Archives); see under Sir Hector Hetherington and/or Sir Daniel Stevenson). In his tribute to Sir Daniel, Sir Hector referred to 'the natural combativeness of his temper'. Another tribute to the 'Chancellor of Glasgow University Sir Daniel Stevenson Bt', which appeared (unsigned) in the *Glasgow Herald*, 12 July 1944, p. 61, says of him: 'Sir Daniel was

The endowment derived from the donor's persuasion that the Scots lad of parts had but to learn the language and get himself out to Buenos Aires to have the New World at his feet. Of Scotland my knowledge came as yet only from books, but I did know something of the tensions surrounding the creation and first tenure of the Chair, and it was no surprise to be asked to submit evidence prior to interview of my knowledge of the [Spanish] language.⁵

I took train to Madrid, arranged an interview with the Minister of Education—ministers were then approachable—and at its conclusion asked innocently if he could be prepared to testify that I could speak Spanish. He was, and did, adding cannily 'for academic purposes'.⁶ Hurdle no. 1. At the interview, how well did I know the country? I explained that for ten years now, save only when my son was born,⁷ I had spent two months every year, Easter and September, studying and travelling in Spain. (Minutes later, Are you married? It was a canny Committee). Hurdle no. 2 and the Chair was mine. Next day a friend taking tea in a hotel in Nairn overheard a gentleman read out from the *Glasgow Herald* news of the appointment. 'What a pity', said his companion, 'they had to appoint a foreigner'.

Also reading the *Herald* that day was a keen-eyed Inspector of Taxes who learnt the salary, divided by four (income tax 5s, in the £), and, three months before my first salary cheque, sent me a final demand. I called to expostulate. I could be married, could have other allowances. 'It is my job', he said, 'to get out an assessment. It is yours to relate it to the facts'. Not

a challenging personality' and 'provoked many controversies' It is clear that Atkinson knew Sir Daniel well, was aware that many found him 'cantankerous', but liked him a great deal. In the memoir he wrote about Entwistle, the first holder at Glasgow of the Stevenson Chair of Spanish, Atkinson refers to Sir Daniel Stevenson as 'a princely and enlightened benefactor to his University'. See William C. Atkinson, 'William J. Entwistle, Modern Humanist (1895–1952)', *Annual Bulletin of the Modern Humanities Research Association*, 25 (November, 1953), 15–30 (p. 20) (address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the MHRA, 2 January 1953, London). Entwistle's appointment to the King Alfonso XIII Professorship of Spanish Studies at Oxford University in 1932 created the vacancy at Glasgow for which Atkinson successfully applied.

5 The description of the Stevenson Chair of Spanish which the University of Glasgow provided to applicants in January 1932, bears out what Atkinson says: namely, that the founder of the Chair was deeply concerned that its holder not only would teach and do research at the University on Spanish language, literature and history, but would also teach and promote the Spanish language for business and commercial purposes at what was then called the Glasgow and West of Scotland Commercial College. It is interesting to note that Atkinson's salary on appointment was £1,100 *per annum*; this sum was more than four times the amount of Ivy McClelland's salary (£250) when in 1930 she was appointed an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Spanish at Glasgow (source: Ivy McClelland, during one of many conversations with Ann Mackenzie in which she recalled her early career).

6 The Minister of Education, in the Second Republic at this time, was the socialist politician Fernando de los Ríos (1879–1949). His testimonial for Atkinson may be consulted in Glasgow University's Archives.

7 Atkinson's first child, and only son, Anthony Cedric.

good enough, I protested, and it wasn't an assessment. He expostulated in his turn. 'Man alive, is it nothing to you to be a professor in Glasgow University?' I said I was learning. I learnt more on a first invitation to dinner in the Professors' Quadrangle, when the door was opened by a page in buttons.⁸

Induction to Senate was not a hurdle but an ordeal. Average age at first glance, sixty plus. I was thirty. 'Put yourself in my hands', said the friendly Bedellus, helping me on with my gown. 'I will see you through'. A bearded senator patted me on the shoulder. 'Never mind', he said. 'You will grow out of it'. I went round the room, mercifully smaller and in numbers, than now, shaking each by the hand and wondering should I ever attain their stature. I have been re-reading the bead-roll of that Senate of October 1932. There were great names among them, starting with the Historiographer Royal of Scotland as Principal,⁹ and all now save the writer long since gathered to their fathers.

Those were the good days in the Scottish university, before a world war came to distort everything. Autonomy was real, including the professor's freedom to make of his Department what he would. Students wore the red gown, and imbibed from their elders respect for the responsibilities of privilege. The idea of the A.U.T. as a trade union, or of university teachers actually going on strike would have been as remote as walking on the moon.

One professor could not have wished more scope. To Spanish were added Portuguese and Catalan. To language and literature—now languages and literatures—history and thought. To Spain and Portugal—this, after the war, was a great leap forward—Latin America, and 'Spanish' could now be re-christened 'Hispanic Studies', a development since generally accepted in British universities. Colleagues in the other modern languages had a country.¹⁰ I had as my parish a peninsula plus a continent and a half, with repeated opportunity to travel in all twenty-two: an

8 The Professors' Square or Quadrangle at Glasgow University derived its name from the fact that all the buildings in that square (located to the right on entering the University's Main Gates in University Avenue), were built for and originally lived in as their homes by the Principal of the University and the University's twelve 'ancient' professors (i.e. the holders of the University's original chairs). Nowadays, the only building still used for the purpose it was initially designed for is the Principal's Lodging. Though it was expanded when renovated in 1988, The Lodging is still at No. 12, in what, in our non-hierarchical times, is now usually known as 'The Square'.

9 The Principal of Glasgow University in 1932, referred to here, was Sir Robert Sangster Rait, Professor of Scottish History and Literature. He had only taken up the post in 1929, and was succeeded in 1936 by Sir Hector Hetherington.

10 For more on Atkinson's pioneering work in expanding the Department of Spanish into the Department of Hispanic Studies at Glasgow (therefore setting an example which many other professors and heads of departments of Spanish were to follow), see Mackenzie's Introduction to this volume; see also below, John C. McIntyre, 'Professor William C. Atkinson (WCA) As Remembered by Some Former Students'.

opportunity progressively extended to my students, who with time would achieve their own careers in universities throughout the English-speaking world.¹¹ Plus, for myself, the States and Canada, and, an extra bonus, a session as visiting professor in Rhodesia, where Angola on one side, Mozambique on the other, made Portuguese the inevitable first language.

If as many men as girls were now studying modern languages, one attraction was the year abroad in one country, a term in the other, which the Scottish tradition of two languages and a 4-year course not merely allowed but required. 'If only we had that fourth year' was the common envy south of the border.¹²

One contribution to enlarging the pattern arose fortuitously from perhaps the oddest experience of a long career, the heading—for an Irishman—of a first Scottish cultural delegation to the U.S.S.R., 1954. In Moscow, in conversation with the Rector of its new University City, I commented on the absurdity that drove our students of Russian to Dublin or Bordeaux in search of linguistic experience with the families of pre-Revolution exiles. He agreed, thinking too of Russian students who could not travel west, but such matters could only be resolved at the top.

Home, I related all this in a letter to *The Times*. The Editor gave it pride of place, and the rest followed: a long correspondence taken up by other journals, a leading article, Foreign Office discussions, an Anglo-Soviet commission.¹³ The following year saw Glasgow students in Moscow, Russian students in Britain, since when study in Russia has been as normal and uninhibited as in Spain or Portugal.

On my arrival in Glasgow there was still one survivor from the old dispensation under which a professor carried on till he was carried out. Forty years on this professor attained his biblical span and the University said enough was enough. He made a calculation. Had Pope Nicholas V had the prescience in 1451 to include Hispanic Studies among the first chairs of his new foundation,¹⁴ and had each occupant thereof served out the same forty years, he would have been just no. 13 in the grand succession. One-thirteenth of the life of one of Europe's oldest universities: now there's a thought.

11 For information on the careers followed by at least some of Atkinson's graduates in Hispanic Studies, see below, McIntyre, 'Professor William C. Atkinson (WCA) As Remembered by Some Former Students'.

12 Atkinson refers here to the fact that Honours undergraduates studied two languages during four years of study at the University; the compulsory year abroad he mentions was additional; so that the MA Double Honours Degree in Modern Languages at Glasgow University took, in total, five years to complete.

13 See letter by William C. Atkinson, 'Students of Russian: Cultural Exchanges Essential', in 'Letters to the Editor', *The Times*, 17 August 1954, p. 7. See also his 'On Friendship with Russia', *The Fortnightly* (July 1954), 27–33.

14 An allusion to the fact that Glasgow University was founded by papal bull in 1451 (letter of Pope Nicholas V, dated at St Peter's in Rome on 7 January 1451).

And the foreigner, proof over the decades against temptation from both sides of the border, both sides of the Atlantic,¹⁵ still lives in Scotland. He may not have acquired the accent. He does take salt in his porridge.

15 An oblique indication that Atkinson was offered chairs by a number of different universities, nationally and internationally, but turned them down. He was shortlisted for the King Alfonso XIII Professorship of Spanish Studies at the University of Oxford in 1952 (left vacant by the death of Professor William J. Entwistle), a post he presumably would have accepted, but the successful applicant, appointed from 1 October 1953, was Peter Russell. Coincidentally, Albert Sloman was appointed to the Gilmour Chair of Spanish at Liverpool University from the same date. As noted by Mackenzie in her Introduction, Atkinson was one of the external assessors consulted by Liverpool over Sloman's appointment.